

IS *ADAPTATION*. TRULY AN ADAPTATION? ¹

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Abstract

The article begins by historicizing film adaptation from the arrival of cinema, pointing out the many theoretical approaches under which the process has been seen: from the concept of “the same story told in a different medium” to a comprehensible definition such as “the process through which works can be transformed, forming an intersection of textual surfaces, quotations, confluences and inversions of other texts”. To illustrate this new concept, the article discusses Spike Jonze’s film *Adaptation.*, according to James Naremore’s proposal which considers the study of adaptation as part of a general theory of repetition, joined with the study of recycling, remaking, and every form of retelling. The film deals with the attempt by the scriptwriter Charles Kaufman, cast by Nicholas Cage, to adapt/translate a non-fictional book to the cinema, but ends up with a kind of film which is by no means what it intended to be: a film of action in the model of Hollywood productions. During the process of creation, Charles and his twin brother, Donald, undergo a series of adventures involving some real persons from the world of film, the author and the protagonist of the book, all of them turning into fictional characters in the film. In the film, adaptation then signifies something different from its traditional meaning.

Keywords: Film adaptation; postmodernism.

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“As a musing on the craft of screenwriting, *Adaptation.* is a wonderful exercise in parody and technique”. (Michôd)

Film adaptation: state of the art

Since the arrival of cinema, it was seen that the new art was able to narrate, with its own resources, a story previously told in novels or short stories. Then, the practice of transforming literary narrative into film narrative spread to the point that many films today have as their origin not their own scripts, created especially for the cinema, but a literary work. This may not be necessarily a short story or a novel: a poem or an essay may be the starting point for films, documentaries being a variation of this option. However, since most adaptations come from a narrative, that which is normally understood as adaptation is therefore the cinema version of a work of fiction. This is why, when discussing adaptation, we think primarily of a literary source.

The process of adaptation has been seen as unidirectional – going always from literary text to film – with priority for the former at the expense of the latter. Consequently, the study of adaptation tended to concentrate on the comparison between two types of text and the measure of success attained transferring from one to the other. In summary, the concern of critics has been to verify the faithfulness of the film compared to the work of fiction, that is, if the film manages to capture all the elements of the narrative: plot, characters, etc.

The first serious theoretical work on adaptation appeared in 1957. George Bluestone defended the possibility of the metamorphosis of novels into other means, each with their narrative resources. Studies such as those of Geoffrey Wagner (1975) and Dudley Andrew (1984) followed, both adopting the criterion of faithfulness. The former classified adaptations according to how close they were to the literary text, considering those which were closest as *transpositions*, those which were not so close as *commentaries* and those which used the original only as a clue as *allegories*. Dudley Andrew classified them in a way more or less parallel to Wagner’s terminology, as *loans*, *intersections*

and *transformations*, respectively. As a whole, all the process was seen as a translation – an intersemiotic translation – in so far as it was meant to transmit a message/story/idea, conceived in a given system – literature – in terms of another sign system – the cinema. The analysis of adaptation concentrated on seeking equivalencies, that is, in the success of the filmmaker finding filmic means to substitute the literary. Therefore, they began to look for filmic resources which had functions parallel to those of the literary work. However, this held its privileged position, the touchstone to evaluate the film. They always sought to find “What Novels Can do that Films Can’t and vice-versa”.²

Various approaches followed, all of them comparing both texts and considering the faithfulness of the filmic text to the literary text. Theorists like Seymour Chatman, Keith Cohen and Stuart McDougal maintained the belief in the interrelationship between cinema and literature and proposed several studies about adaptation, always seeking to analyse the equivalent elements in both texts and prioritising, therefore, the criterion of faithfulness. Keith Cohen was concerned with what he called the “dynamics of exchange”, that is, the tendency of novels to develop cinematographic resources and vice-versa. Seymour Chatman based himself on Barthes’ studies on narrative to study the way in which filmmakers manage to transfer narrative functions to the cinema. McDougal analyses the way in which elements of the narrative (plot, characters, point of view, structure, time, atmosphere, inner thought and others) are transferred to the cinema. In a way, all of them considered film adaptation as a kind of translation and prioritised the criterion of faithfulness.

Because most of the scholars of adaptation were trained in literary criticism, critical reception of film adaptations was “plagued with the urge to ask how faithful the film version is to the original” (Vincendeau, xiii). Recently, critics from cinema (film studies, film journalism) began to take the relation between the two means more seriously. Then there was a change in the focus of studies about adaptation, which now emphasises filmic elements, using comparison to enrich the evaluation of the film and not the opposite. Criticism is based on “the kind of

adaptation the film proposes to be” (McFarlane, 22) and not on the supposition that there is only one way to adapt a literary work. Three people stand out in this new current: Brian McFarlane, Timothy Corrigan and James Naremore. The fact that these three come from the sphere of film studies is a sign of disagreement with previous approaches.

Brian McFarlane’s (1996) work also considers adaptation as translation. Although the author criticizes the criterion of fidelity, stating that not always the most faithful adaptations are the most successful, he uses as examples for his theory films which are more or less faithful to their literary origins. Although referring to “other elements of intertextuality” and to “influences outside the novel”, McFarlane uses as his strategy the description of elements which are easily transferable from the novel to the cinema (facts, events, plot) and those which demand greater creativity³ (diffuse elements related to atmosphere, mood and psychological aspects). Therein lies, according to him, the art of the filmmaker. In spite of the fact that he comes from the cinema, literary text continues to be the reference and the translation process is seen as one way. The basis for his theory, or rather, of his proposal of analysis of adaptations, is based on narrative, setting aside the issues of authorship and industrial and cultural context. In a sense, McFarlane continues the proposal of the various scholars before him.

The discourse on adaptation, however, cannot be limited to analysing the process only as translation. The study of techniques of utterance which have been used until today should only be used as part of the study of adaptation. As Andrew suggests, it is important to transfer the centre of interest from form to political, cultural and economic issues. And it is more important to do a hybrid study without prejudice.

The works of Timothy Corrigan (1999) and James Naremore (2000) point towards this way. Corrigan does so when he examines the adaptations in four complementary structures – historical contextualization, the issue of traditional cultural hierarchies, the process of adaptation itself and intertextuality. Naremore brings together an excellent collection of articles on the “theory” of adaptation and proposes a change of focus. Corrigan and Naremore’s proposals have

in common the need for a historically based and detailed comparison, however aware of the specificity of each medium.

An example of the transfer of the centre of interest from form to other issues – political, cultural and economic – is the work of Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (1999). The authors begin an interesting discussion on film adaptation, disconsidering strictly literary sources and thinking of adaptation in a wider sense, which includes other cultural products as sources. Their discussion begins with the critique of faithfulness and all the prejudice inherent in it, covers the narrative approach, and gets to the issues linked to cultural codes and the role of the audience. The scope of the concept of adaptation suggested by the authors calls for the use of two strategies in the transformation of texts: recovering the past and activating the role of the audience, including the community of fans. This tendency shows the activities of reception and consumption and abandons considerations of aesthetic and cultural value. The process of adaptation is therefore bidirectional because it is made up of the translation to the verbal text of literary works and other cultural products for the cinema, but also other types of text, including film. Intertextuality and ideology become concepts that underlie this contemporary proposal.

James Naremore's study, based on updated concepts of author and work, proposes a movement toward an analysis of adaptation which includes activities such as recycling, remake and any other ways of retelling. It takes into account our time of mechanical reproduction and electronic communication, in which adaptation becomes part of the theory of repetition, moving from the margin to the centre of cultural studies. Naremore proposes an approach that goes "beyond faithfulness to arrive at the specificity of the medium" and "beyond translation to transformation". For him, adaptation is a multidirectional, dialogic and intertextual process. He proposes that the analysis should be based on what he calls intertextual dialogism, that is, on the idea that "each text forms an intersection of textual surfaces, tissues of anonymous formulas, variations of these formulas, conscious and unconscious quotations, conflations and inversions of other texts". This

kind of dialogism, according to Robert Stam (apud Naremore), refers to the open and infinite possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture, that is, the whole matrix of communicative elocutions in which the artistic context is to be found. He believes these practices reach the text not only through recognisable influences but also through a subtle process of dissemination. Film adaptations would be situated in a whirlwind of intertextual references and transformations, of texts that generate other texts in an infinite process of recycling, transformation, transmutation, without any necessarily defined starting point. This includes the concepts of intertextuality, transtextuality and hypertextuality, suggested by Gérard Genette, which are useful to define adaptations.

Within the new proposal, the critique sets about recognising these forms, as well as investigating the ideological congruence of the film as a literary narrative and other sources. He then analyses the influence of academic criticism on the adaptors and also focuses on the concept of the author, which includes the issue of the author's rights and the use of the name, similarity and biography. It will mainly focus on the investigation of something (from the original work), which the adaptation will restore for the spectators.

In this way, the definition of adaptation will be widened to include, as works to be transformed, plays, sequels, remakes, TV shows and series, articles from specialised magazines and others. And the study of the process of adaptation will not only be the study of filmic translation and of performance to become a study of inter / transtextuality. It is in this context that the film *Adaptation*. will be analysed.

Adaptation, and full stop!

Before working this example of the insertion of the film within the possibilities generated by culture, it is necessary to have a brief summary of the works involved in the process. Susan Orlean writes a non-fictional novel, *The Orchid Thief*, adapted from her article from the *New Yorker* about the theft of a rare orchid (ghost orchid). Orlean's

research to write it included a trip to Florida in order to investigate the story of John Laroche, the orchid collector, arrested for stealing them from an area of preservation belonging to the Seminole Indians. She spent some time with Laroche and explored the strange world of fanatic orchid growers, which resulted in the book that became a best-seller. In 1998, writer Charlie Kaufman was commissioned by the head of production of *Columbia* studios to adapt this novel. In the script, he becomes a character who is contracted for the same task⁴, but here the attempts are mixed in with the experiences of the character Susan Orlean. While he struggles in vain to produce his script, Donald, his twin brother⁵, a fully fictional character, appears also writing the script of a thriller, following the traditional model suggested by specialist Robert McKee.⁶ Blocked and seeking a way out, Charlie goes to New York to find the author of the book. As he does not attain this, Charlie decides to participate, at his brother's suggestion, of a seminar about scripts, given by McKee. When McKee sees his despair with the blockage, he suggests giving the film a grand finale. Still immobilized by the blockage and his shyness, Charlie asks his brother to help to finalize the script and interview the writer. After the interview, the brothers feel a certain mystery around Orlean. They follow her and discover that she and Laroche, besides having an affair, are growing the orchid to make drugs. Caught spying the couple, Charlie is captured and taken to a swamp to be killed. Donald appears to save him, but is killed in a car accident.

This is the story of the film, in which the grand finale and the plot go well beyond what is told in the book – an account in the first person, almost documentary, about Susan Orlean's research, involving Laroche, his life and many narratives and myths around orchids and the very region of Florida. In order to narrate its story, the film moves skillfully between three times: the present, in which Charlie tries to write his script; the recent past, that is, three years before, when Susan Orlean does her research to write the book that Charlie is trying to adapt; and the distant past, two years before, when Laroche was caught in the act. As the film unfolds, the three times become scenes of the script that

Charlie is writing. Therefore, besides linking the three times, the film ends up intertwining the three stories: those of the scriptwriter, the author of the novel and the subject of the book. Visually, the film shows three distinct worlds: Charlie's world (Nicolas Cage) in Los Angeles, Orlean's world (Meryl Streep) in New York, and Laroche's (Chris Cooper) in Florida. Each of these worlds was filmed in a different way. The walls of Charlie's room, for example, a place of solitude and depression, where the sun never shines, are painted white, because the idea was to reflect the emptiness of his life, his totally destitute world. On the other hand, the world of freedom of the flower-grower was completely different, demanding lively colors. The idea was to visually transmit the green and the tropical sense of the south of Florida, as well as the heat and humidity. The third set suggests Orlean's "habitat", with a more traditional look. The film moves between these three visions and then goes towards the swamp, where the three worlds merge and the images suggest the claustrophobic and bewildering feeling of the place (Hart, 2002).

Observing the story told in the film, I note that it gets completely away from the parameters of a traditional film adaptation because it extrapolates that which is contained in the book. It also shows us characters, with the exception of Donald, who are real life people, who, however, are fictionalized, that is, what is narrated about them, although in a way biographical, is also a fiction. It is not possible to draw the limits between reality and fiction: the representation of the facts of Susan Orlean's reporting is incorporated into the imaginative possibilities of the scriptwriter.

Susan Orlean's book is not a work of fiction. It is a romanced account of orchids, based on a real fact: a theft which occurred on a reservation in Florida. The material for the book/article is obtained through the interviews of the novelist with John Laroche himself and of research on orchids and on Florida, as can be seen from the bibliography at the end of the book. How do you transform a book about flowers into a Hollywood film? The real Charlie Kaufman answers the question, writing one of the most eccentric and original scripts of recent times. In an interview, he confessed having read and liked the

book and accepted the task of adapting it, without, however, foreseeing the difficulties he would face.⁷ Therefore, beginning with Nicholas Cage in the role of Charlie (playing the real Kaufman) wondering through the set of his previous film (*Being John Malkovitch*), fighting to adapt Susan Orlean's book to the screen, and proclaiming the wish that his work should not be artificially guided by the plot, the film is biographical. It is also biographical because all those involved in the process of creation are laid out in his mind: himself, the author of the book, the orchid thief, the script specialist, the head of production and others. However, as mentioned before, all of them are fictionalized. Therefore, in spite of picturing people and facts from real life, the film goes beyond this and includes imaginary facts that happened after the publication of the book.

In real life, Susan Orlean is a writer of the *New Yorker*. In the film, she is still the writer of a recognized literary magazine, however, thanks to the innovative minds of the director and scriptwriter, the similarity between both of them ends there. After the script is ready, her agent advised her about the possible twists that would occur in the film, and, according to him, it was like "transforming orchids into tulips." At the beginning, Susan liked the idea, but suggested her name should be changed. However, as it was a kind of experiment, they convinced her to agree into becoming a protagonist as well. According to her own statement, when she saw the film the first time, she thought it strange: "It wasn't like I was watching someone do an impersonation of me". When hearing the voiceover – with material taken straight from the book – "Hearing my own words (...) they don't seem like I wrote them. (...) In their own strange way, they did tell the story of the book". What most impressed her was that, after seeing the film, she better understood her own book, understood what it was: "a kind of meditation about passion (Clarke)". However, Susan finalizes:

The book is very different from the movie, which I think is great. Each of them is its own creature" (...). If you can't bear

the thought of someone else working with your stuff, you probably shouldn't sell an option. I've been lucky because I've been very happy with what's happened, but I also think that if someone made a really bad movie of something of mine, it's not my problem. There've been plenty of great books that have been made into bad movies, and there have been plenty of great movies made out of bad books". (...) "With *Adaptation*, it's a little different, obviously, when it's my name and so forth, but I trusted the people who were working on it on and it felt like it was an adventure. Luckily, it's turned into a good adventure. (Clarke, "The Power", 2002).

Charles Stewart Kaufman (Charlie Kaufman) is also a writer in real life and after writing for television, he did the script for *Being John Malkovich*. According to him, in spite of having liked Susan Orlean's book and having accepted the work of adapting it to the cinema, he actually panicked not knowing how to do it and became depressed and scared because people were waiting for the result. The similarity between Kaufman, the writer, and Charlie, the bachelor character, who has a twin brother, ends here. There was no interview with Susan Orlean or John Laroche. Charles' lack of skill in dealing with people, his desire to always go back to the dark room where he writes, his aversion to himself where self-esteem is always hiding, his difficulty in dealing with women, all this is pure fiction.

The idea of the writer to mix imagination with reality is not new. What is new in this film is the obsessive care with which Kaufman and Spike Jonze, the director, worked the idea. To dramatize his own struggle, Kaufman creates a character that divides into two identical twins, neither of which is his image: the first, a successful scriptwriter, but nervous, insecure, determined to avoid Hollywood conventions; the other, less intelligent, an amateur writer, not very conscious, who not only embraces these conventions but is also recognized. While Charlie struggles against the writer's blockage and suffers seeking a new way to adapt, Donald, without any effort, produces a mediocre imitation of a

Hollywood thriller, which the industry immediately grasps. Charlie and Donald may even represent two sides of Kaufman's creative personality: an introvert artist and an extrovert salesman.

However, the story of Charlie Kaufman's struggle to adapt the book gives the title to the film: *Adaptation*. In fact, the great irony is the fact that the subject of the film is the inability, the very incapacity to adapt the book, but it is, at the same time, its adaptation. However, as announced by the character Charlie himself, it is a failed adaptation. The task of adapting is considered impossible from the beginning of the film, when he admits he had not had a single original thought. In a parallel with the true Kaufman, in spite of the wish to write a script without the traditional Hollywood conventions, Charlie finds out that, without them, he is completely lost.

Therefore *Adaptation*. is without any doubt a film adaptation, but an adaptation which follows neither the traditional models of Hollywood, nor McKee's rules, nor the suggestions of theorists. The film is definitely an adaptation in the metaphorical sense, a mixture of ways of telling, the result of the popular saying "He who tells a tale adds a tail!"⁸ Let's then examine how the film may be analyzed in this way.

Webster's dictionary defines 'adaptation' as the act or process of adapting or how to adjust to environmental conditions. The film may be read as the process of adapting, of rewriting in a new form. When translating from literature to the cinema, when telling the story of orchids and of John Laroche in another semiotic system, the film is adapting in the traditional sense of the word 'adapt'. But the film can also be read as an adjustment (of the characters) to the environmental conditions, just as flowers adjust themselves through mutation, in an attempt to survive. Or as a change that occurs in relation to people and things, in the very adaptation to which people are frequently submitted.

First we have Laroche, in the book and in the film, a comical and lively character, until the moment a tragic event happens in his life. From then on he becomes much more real, a kind of thoughtful, introspective person, contrasting with his restless and arrogant character (Simon, 2003). In the book, and in real life, his interest changes

constantly, but in the film he ends up fully engaged with Orlean, teaching her all about orchids and even having an affair with her. The Orlean of the film also transforms: from the serious and sophisticated writer of real life, she becomes passionately interested in something. From the state of silent self-pressure she imposed on herself as a character at the beginning, to a state of doubt, then, to a state of passion and, then, to a state of almost murderous anger at the end of the film.

However, it is the relationship between Laroche and Orlean and their common interest in orchids which moves the film on to larger themes, one of which brings up Darwin's experiments. At this moment, adaptation is defined not only as the process of taking a book to the screen, but also as the process of mutation/adaptation carried out by living beings (flowers and humans) throughout life. At the personal level, Laroche convinces Susan that she lacks a passion such as his in life. By extension, this need reaches Charlie, who struggles to remain faithful to his vision, but must in the end adapt. He has to adapt the book and adapt himself to the world around him. In order to do both things, he must violate, violate the book, which he does as he violates himself. And he must violate his sacred ideals, his very unreachable models of perfection. He perceives that the only way to overcome his blockage is to place himself at the center of the story in the same way Kaufman did in real life. Adapting then means adapting to life, adapting to contingencies, to dreams, to passions. Therefore *Adaptation*. also refers to the adaptation of all the characters and, mainly, that of Charlie. If we review the protagonists carefully, we can discern the kind of reality/fiction game Kaufman and Jonze are playing (Jones, 2002).

As with the characters, the film also transforms and adaptation begins to mean the film itself, which starts on the set of *Being John Malkovich*, with the writer represented by Nicholas Cage, placed at the center of the personalized adaptation of the best-seller. With the contribution of an exceptional cast and the anticipated support of the critics, it was able to attract the attention of a curious public looking for something different. In a certain sense, the film is faithful to the book *The Orchid Thief*, a journalistic book, the story of which is the story of

its own creation. In the same way, the film is about the process of its own creation. The film also adapts the structure of the book, a narrative with many layers, with jumps in time, which not only looks analytically and self-consciously at the process of narration, but mainly at the writer's need to commit himself to his material. But faithfulness ends there, because Kaufman, in order to commit himself to his material, divides himself into twins who appear identical but are the exact opposite of each other. While Charlie is morose, depressive, introspective, anti-social and fanatic about the purity of his work, Donald is relaxed, party-going, superficial, relates easily and tends to make his work as commercial as possible. As in the book, the film is self-reflexive because Kaufman wants to do everything he writes about himself: the obligation of adapting a non-fiction book about an obsessive orchid grower who represents the core of the film, full of interference from the industry. But the film itself is transformed through Donald's intervention. Both personalities contrast from the moment Donald arrives at Charlie's house to write his script, which will certainly be an easy sell, and does so in a very serene way, while Charlie struggles with his blockage (Rapfogel). However, after help from Donald, the film is adapted once again, takes another course and that is the reason why Donald appears in the credits of the film. Initially, the film was supposed to be built on Charlie's principles, but ends up constructed according to the principles of most Hollywood films, and, therefore, according to Donald's principles.

Placing Donald as co-writer of the film script is Kaufman and Jonze's way of "beautifying the orchid". Donald's presence makes the film a meditation about what it is to feel like a writer and face the fears of the blank page or the blank screen in America in the 21st century. Therefore, we cannot say that *Adaptation*. is a faithful adaptation of the book, but its script is, undoubtedly, a mutation and innovation, "a ghostly and wild hybrid of Susan Orlean's book, *The Orchid Thief*" (Clarke).

The success of the film lies in the courage of insisting on a different kind of subject, which, in turn, demands a different structure. *Adaptation*. is the result of the demand of a post-modern opening to

new possibilities for commercial films: non-linearity modeled not by the logic of reality, or by the demands of narrative, but by the obsessive and neurotic mind of the writer, capable of going far beyond, renouncing faithfulness to the Hollywood ideals of clarity and conciseness. What is most interesting is that the film is mainly about the solipsism of the protagonist, his desperate effort to get out of his own mind and write a script. What makes it so difficult is that, in spite of everything, the only thing of interest is himself and what gets him away from this is his twin brother, Donald, who shares the credits for the script with Kaufman and who is, in fact, fictitious.

Final words

What the film concludes is that, in spite of the lack of respect for the cheap strategy used by Donald, this is the same one as used for his own script. Donald the character dies to be absorbed by his brother. And the secret of the film is in the title: the one who was avoided (Donald) becomes the essential figure in the adaptation/finalization of the film, which in the end became a mistake, the opposite of the initial proposition. It began as a kind of anti-cinema, a rejection of traditional actions (car chases, love affairs, deaths) that make up most films, but ended up adapting to them. Kaufman followed the motto: *Adapt or die*. The film adapted because it did not want to die. Therefore, *Adaptation*. is really an adaptation in every sense, and full stop!

As a literature professional, I might say that the analysis of this film could be done starting with Susan Orlean's book. In this sense, the adaptation would illustrate the procedure proposed by Geoffrey Wagner, who, in 1975, described this kind of adaptation as a transformation, which takes as a reference a single aspect of the original literary text and creates another completely independent work. However, in an attempt to use the most recent theoretical trends which propose that adaptation should be studied in a fertile field in which the notions of the unity and authorship of the work do not exist, this analysis considers

the film as a product of a culture made up of unequal and fragmented experiences, and the process as a path which is non-linear, two-way, and even, at times, illogical, as befits a post-modern piece.

Notes

1. This article is part of a research undergone at the Queen Mary University of London, with funds provided by Capes / Brasil.
2. Seymour Chatman, 1981.
3. McFarlane uses the terms “transfer” for the process of transfer of elements easily transferable and “adaptation proper” for the process that demands greater creativity from the filmmaker.
4. In the text I use Charlie to refer to the character in the film, played by Nicholas Cage, and Kaufman as the real life writer who wrote the script of *Adaptation*.
5. Nicholas Cage also plays the role of Donald.
6. In real life, Robert McKee is a specialist on scriptwriting. His role is played by Brian Cox in the film.
7. www.chasingthefrog.com/reelfaces/adaptation_interview4.php.
8. Free translation of a Brazilian saying: “*Quem conta um conto, aumenta um ponto*”

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